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The Case Against HUAC

THE House Un-American Activities Committee is a lazy, indolent and preposterous institution which promotes circuses and subverts democratic freedoms. Its brilliantly staged fiasco in Chicago last week once again demonstrates that it should be opposed in the name of economy in government as well as on grounds of constitutional principle.

The fundamental case against HUAC is clear enough. Its mandate directs it to investigate Un-American propaganda in the United States. Under the Bill of Rights, all forms of political advocacy, including propaganda, are placed beyond the reach of government and cannot be abridged even by the HUAC. The only exception we have made to this rule is that, under circumstances of clear and present danger, speech can be restricted when it becomes a signal for criminal action rather than an argument.

The committee usually tries to get around this problem posed by its corrupt mandate by saying that it is really concerned with espionage, treason and insurrection. However, these activities have been against the law for some time, the police and not the Congress are supposed to watch out for them, and, in any case, if you can find a man to subpoena him he is certainly not a practicing spy, traitor or insurrectionist. So the committee's real function remains that of invading freedoms of speech, assembly, press, etc.

The American tradition demands the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee. But, as Chicago makes clear, so do aesthetics, common sense—and even sound fiscal management.

The committee did not come to Chicago to seek information in order to frame a new law. The HUAC hardly ever holds working hearings on legislation where witnesses are called to present various points of view. That is because the Un-Americans hardly ever report bills to Congress as a committee. (the HUAC has a long, ingenious list of its

legislative accomplishments, but practically none of the items on it emerged out of its hearings).

BUT perhaps the HUAC was in Chicago to expose dangerous enemies? Not exactly. In this hearing, as in almost all the others, the chief witnesses were paid hands from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. If they knew of anything criminal, they presumably told Mr. J. Edgar Hoover about it long ago. Indeed, from the point of view of the Federal government, the main identities revealed in Chicago last week were those of the undercover agents or informers of the FBI who appeared in public.

And yet, isn't there still a justification for Chicago in that the HUAC educated the public about communism? On this count, one need only rely on the unwittingly hilarious summation of Rep. Edwin E. Willis, chairman of the committee. As one reporter put it, Willis proclaimed that "testimony had shown Communist activity in peace, housing, youth, civil rights and political action organizations." Was it really necessary to transport a Congressional committee and its staff a third of the way across the continent, ring a building with police and impugn the reputation of citizens to come up with such a banality?

But then the real work of the committee is to produce headlines about itself. This was most clearly revealed in the San Francisco hearings of a few years back (they were immortalized in the film fantasy, "Operation Abolition"). One witness, a known Communist, defied the committee. He was ordered bodily ejected from the hearing room. Then the committee had him brought back. Why? Did they think that their kicking him out had made him into a friendly witness? Of course not. They hoped that he would cause another commotion, and he did. For the HUAC, it is not the law, not the exposure, nor education but the circus which is the thing.

So the only hard news out of Chicago last week was about the demonstrators. And the real business of the HUAC is thus to incite attacks upon itself, to describe them as luridly as possible and to use them as a justification for the squandering of more hundreds of thousands of dollars. And the committee is quite willing to ruin reputations in the pursuit of this extraordinary public disservice.

The most basic argument against HUAC is that it has no Constitutional right to exist. But even for those who are unimpressed by this civil libertarian reasoning, the HUAC is, from the point of view of Left, Right and Center, a boondoggle. In the name of principle and of cash and carry, it should be abolished.